

Amph.  
R. Theol.  
C

June. Feb. 10

Sermons of James Freeman Clarke

CHRIST AND CHRISTIANITY IN THE  
LIGHT OF MODERN THOUGHT

III.

Is Christianity a Supernatural Revelation?

*R. L. Johnson*

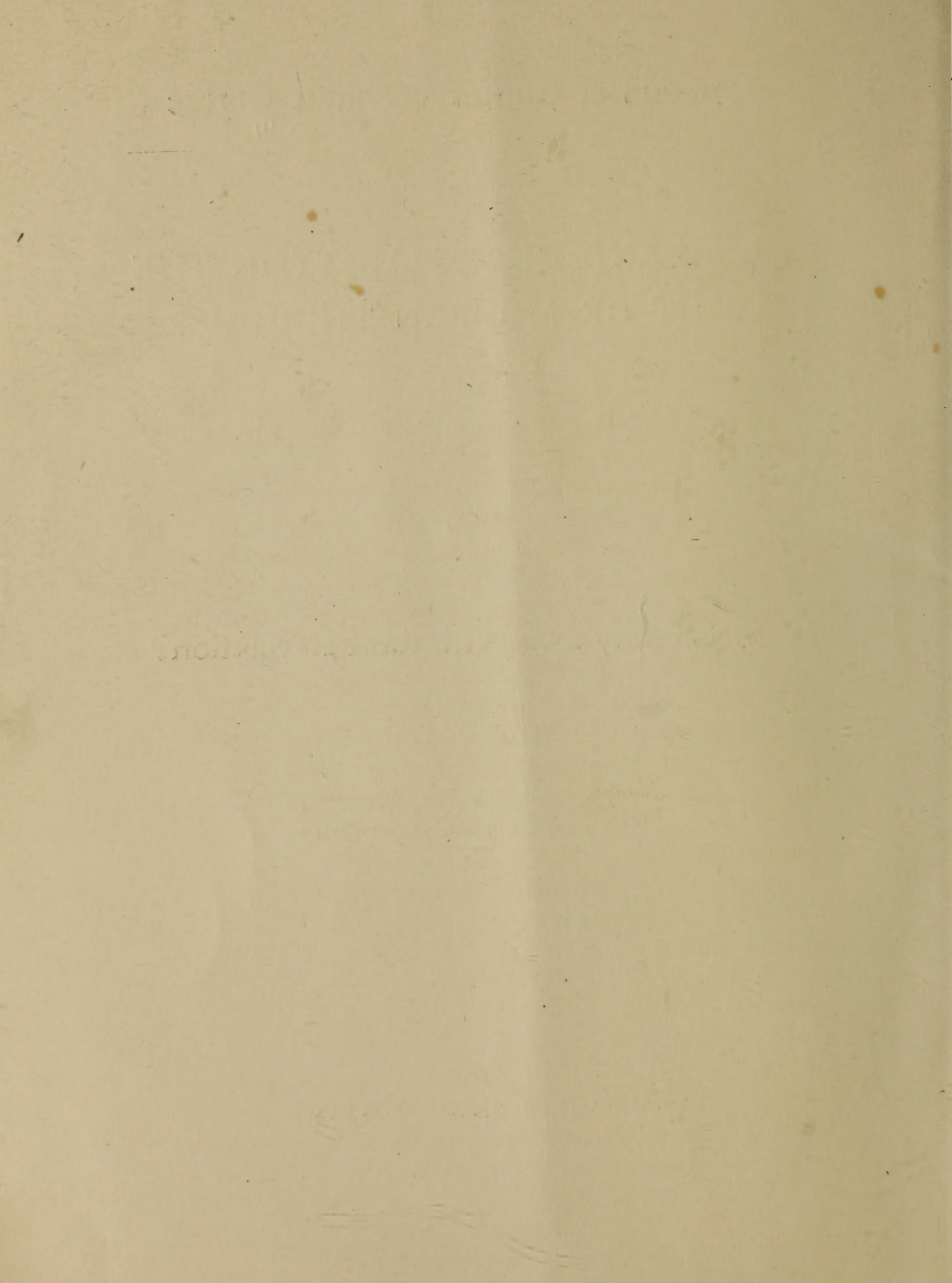
NATIONAL LAW BOOK EXCHANGE,  
828-830 BROAD STREET,  
NEWARK, N. J.

BOSTON

GEO. H. ELLIS Co., 272 CONGRESS STREET

1903





## IS CHRISTIANITY A SUPERNATURAL REVELATION?

---

I propose this morning to consider the question, "Is Christianity a Supernatural Revelation?"

This is a question much discussed, and the answer to it is thought by many to involve the permanence of the Christian religion. Many, perhaps most, Christian theologians contend that the Christian religion is a miraculous intervention of Providence in human affairs, and that its authority over the human conscience and heart depends on the admission of this assumption. This is the sense in which they understand the term "Supernatural Revelation." Others, who regard the Christian religion as no better than other religions,—or, at all events, as possessing no special authority over human belief,—think that, if they can show it is *not* a supernatural revelation, all such authority is gone.

A book called "Supernatural Religion," in three large volumes, was published some years ago in England, and has since gone through several editions. The author begins by this statement: "Christianity professes to be a divine revelation of truths which the human intellect could not otherwise have discovered. It is *not* a form of religion developed by the wisdom of man, *but* a system miraculously communicated to the human race." The author adds, on the next page, "Christianity, as a religion professing to be divinely revealed, is not only supernatural in its origin



and doctrine, but its claim to acceptance is *necessarily* based upon supernatural evidence." The ground of this last statement is that any truth requiring to be supernaturally revealed must be something which we could not learn by the exercise of reason; and our reason cannot prove the truth of it, because it is above reason.

On the basis of these few paragraphs the whole argument of the book rests. It is assumed that, if the writer can show that miracles are impossible or improbable, we have no longer any right to believe in Christianity. He believes he has proved this, and that therefore he has overturned Christianity.

I think, however, that this author would have saved himself the trouble of writing these three volumes if he had begun by defining the word "supernatural" and the word "revelation." Let us attempt the definition of these terms.

Supernatural means that which is *above* nature. What, then, do we mean by nature?

We may mean by nature the whole visible universe, or the world of outward phenomena, which we perceive by the senses. Is there anything above this phenomenal visible world?

Of course there is. There are phenomena, there is also law. We know that the whole outward universe is governed by law. But laws are invisible, not to be perceived by the senses. No one ever saw the law of gravitation. Yet, as these laws govern the phenomena, they are supernatural.

Suppose, then, that we define nature as including the visible phenomena and the invisible laws. Is there anything above nature taken in this sense?

Of course there is. Besides laws, there are forces behind the laws. Laws are not forces, but merely the methods according to which forces act. Behind and above the world

of phenomena and law there is the supernatural world of force, the great unseen universe of causation, the powers which uphold all things, move all things, maintain the order of the universe. All this is unseen, invisible, beyond the domain of sense, and strictly supernatural. And even Herbert Spencer tells us that we are compelled to believe in a first cause above all others, and that this first cause is infinite and independent, though inscrutable.

Thus, then, we see that we live in the presence of two worlds,—one natural, the other supernatural; one visible, and perceived outwardly; the other invisible, and known inwardly by the necessities of the reason.

If there is any religion, it must be supernatural. Christianity differs in no respect from other religions in this regard. All religions are at once natural and supernatural, divine and human, having an outward form and an inward spirit. All of them attempt to show how the things seen and temporal are controlled by the things unseen and eternal. The distinction, therefore, between natural and supernatural religions is an erroneous one.

All nature is full of a supernatural life. Some power behind all things, below all things, around all things, above all things, maintains the vast order of creation. Religious men call this power God, but it is just as real for those who have no such faith. Plunge down into materialism as low as you can. Below all matter there is mind, for there is always law, method, meaning. Chain up universal being by the most iron mechanism; make everything come and go by rigid necessity; freeze the energies of nature into an unchanging fate; or set everything adrift in a wild hurricane of chance and accident,—still there is something more above it all. There is mind, which perceives, reflects, analyzes, combines all this; and mind, which can comprehend nature, is above nature. There is your own will,

which can choose, determine, which takes the initiative; your imagination, which creates new worlds, which pours the light of poetry over all existence. The whole of this belongs to a supernatural domain, outside of the mechanical world of mere facts, and above it.

Neither is the real distinction between Christianity and other religions to be found in the word "revelation." Is not God revealed in nature, as well as in Christ? Are not "the invisible things of him from the foundation of the world clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead"? Do not "the heavens declare his glory, and the firmament show forth the work of his hands"? What is meant by the opening sentence of the Gospel of John, "In the beginning was *the Word*," except that God revealed himself in the very first act of creation, when "he spake, and it was done, commanded, and it stood fast"?

There never was a sentence more full of truth than the first line of the Gospel of John: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." In the beginning of all things revelation came. The first moment of creation was a word of God. The earliest atom of the universe had in it something of the divine glory and beauty. God is perpetual revelation, an ever-spoken word, a never-ending utterance, a fountain of light, pouring forth wisdom, beauty, life. God is word. God is utterance. God is revelation.

There is a revelation of God in the beauty of the opening day, when the tender light of a June morning creeps up from below in sweet flushes of rosy tints; when the earth, spinning silently on its axle, turns toward the lamp of day. All nature waits for the coming of the king. The little birds, whose sweet carols began in the early twilight, are silent, expectant of his approach. The ocean rolls its mill-



ion waves toward the dawn. And, as we feel this calm presence, we say: "Lo! God is here, and I knew it not. This is none other than the house of God, and this the gate of heaven!"

All the events which stir the human heart are utterances and revelations of God. All are at the same time natural and supernatural, divinely wonderful yet humanly reasonable. They come from above: they are full of a mysterious wonder and charm; but they seem so in harmony with our best inmost selves that they do not astonish us as if by an irruption of some foreign element, but lift us up to a higher plane of our own human nature. They are revelations, but they are revelations to us of what is most deep and beautiful in our own souls.

So there comes to the child the charm of this outward world into which he has come as a blessed visitor. What joy the little child takes digging in the sand, paddling in the water, wading in the snow, sliding on the ice, picking both hands full of wild flowers, watching the drops of rain as they strike the window! All to him is wonder, glory. Everything is an element of the supernatural world. All these things are blessed gifts from above. He has never heard of God. He knows not his name, but God's love and light are in all his thoughts. This world is a vision of glory and beauty to him. The strange charm of Wordsworth's "Ode to Immortality" is in this, that he first described to us this childish vision, which we have all felt,—a vision which blends heaven and earth in one:—

"There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream,  
The earth, and every common sight,  
To me did seem  
Apparelled in celestial light."

"Whither is fled the visionary gleam?  
Where is it now, the glory and the dream?"

Wordsworth describes the child as one over whom his immortality "broods like the day,"—"a presence not to be put by." The whole ode touches us so deeply because so full of that life we all remember,—the child's life of freedom and joy, before cares come, and toil and anxiety and disappointment, and poor ambitions and low vanities arrive to turn our eyes downward to earth and sin. The whole ode is a flat denial of the theological doctrine of original sin. But it refutes it as poetry always disposes of error, not by contradiction, but by a higher affirmation. Wordsworth teaches us that children come direct from heaven, not full of native depravity, but "trailing clouds of glory." Yet, so far as I know, no theologian has ever accused Wordsworth of heresy, or denounced him as an infidel on this account.

When "love's first dream" comes to the youth and maiden, that also is full of a supernatural wonder and beauty. It overflows into all romance and poetry. Everything is clothed with an ideal charm. There is a new heaven and a new earth. The freshness of that vision may melt into the light of the common human affection, but it opens the gates of the upper world, and reveals to man the capacity that is in him for unselfish love and the ability to go wholly out of himself in devotion to another soul.

The voice of conscience within is another revelation of the supernatural element in which we live and move. Conscience is something in us, yet above us, which speaks with divine authority, which gives no reason why we should obey, but says simply "you ought, you ought not." Deep in every human soul are heard the awful tones of this divine command. If we did not know there was a God in any other way, we should know him thus. For who but God has this right of absolute command? Who but he can send the sense of peace when we obey the solemn monitor,



discontent and remorse when we are disobedient? As by the law and power of gravitation every atom in the universe is held fast to the throne of God, so by conscience every soul, good or bad, is held to the divine presence. We not only say, "If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there," but also, "If I make my abode in hell, thou art there also." We cannot go down into a hell of sin so low but God's authority goes with us in the conscience, holding us forever as in the hollow of his hand.

Science, in its endless explorations, seeks out the furthest nebula of light with space-penetrating telescopes, searches into the minutest forms of infusorial life with its powerful microscopes. Everywhere it finds new wonders, new adaptations. The little creatures invisible to the naked eye come into the world as fully equipped in their infinitesimal organization as though they were meant to be angels and archangels. Out of the furthest limits of space, vast systems of stars are rushing on their mighty way, with their attendant worlds, each keeping the path ordained for it, each making a part of the majestic order of creation. In all nature we find this great life and wisdom, this element of supernatural power and beauty. Thus God flows into his universe in every part, and no one can find him out to perfection.

Yet there are men of science who do not see God in these wonders of his creation, and think that everything in the universe may be explained by force and law. Why do these very intelligent men miss that sight of the divine element in nature which the common heart of mankind has always known? I think for the same cause that led Jesus to thank God because things hidden from the wise and prudent of his own time were revealed to babes. Not that he did not wish the wise and prudent to have this knowledge, also, for he tried to give it to them; but, if they

could not see it, he was thankful that it was made manifest to humbler hearts.

All depends on the point of view. The man who devotes his whole energy to the discovery of phenomena discovers facts and laws, but may see nothing beyond. The man who turns his attention wholly outward misses the facts which are revealed to the inner consciousness. He who deals with processes of the understanding does not rise into the sight of absolute truth and beauty. We find what we look for. The critic, shrewd, vigilant, with eye trained to notice errors, sees the minute contradictions in the Gospel of John, notices how often this record differs from the others, and concludes the author cannot be a witness to be relied on. But, looking thus carefully and conscientiously for inconsistencies and omissions, he fails to feel the wonderful simplicity and honesty of the narrative, the touching pathos which comes only from reality. He does not see how full the story is both of a natural and supernatural beauty, a revelation of man and God, nowhere else to be found. What is the chaff to the wheat? What matters it if we cannot explain how John's time for the Passover can be harmonized with that of the synoptic gospels, so long as we have the story of the conversations of Jesus with his disciples? Whether the raising of Lazarus can be explained according to natural law I do not know, but I am sure that the story as it is told is no invention, but a narrative full of the reality which belongs to truth alone. We have these treasures, no doubt, in earthen vessels. Prosaic criticism may declare these vessels to belong to a low order of ceramic art; but the higher criticism, which opens the soul to the truth, finds in them those jewels of thought which sparkle forever.

There is, no doubt, a false view, which turns the supernatural into the natural, which contends that it is a viola-

tion of law. Much theology has taken this false position. There is a supernatural rationalism which, having introduced Christianity by signs and wonders, and based it on miracles, then turns Christianity itself into pure naturalism again, making of it some mercantile arrangement or legal contrivance by which our debts may be paid by Christ's death. This takes the divine element out of Christianity itself, and makes it supernatural only in its method of entering the world. But the true view I would rather call rational supernaturalism. Christianity is natural in its coming, but it brings to us a higher life. The miracles of Jesus are no violations of law, but examples of mysterious powers not yet fully revealed, yet making part of universal law. The life of Jesus is at once in the highest degree human and divine,—a revelation of pure humanity, and showing us how, when humanity is pure, it may be transfigured into a divine beauty by the life of God. Beginning to study Jesus on the human side, we enter the temple by the court of the Gentiles, accessible to all mankind, and pass inward and upward, as we are able, till we enter the holy of holies, where we can see how God and man may be perfectly at one.

Can any one deny that Christianity is, in the highest sense, a revelation of God? I do not mean by Christianity the outward forms, sacraments, usages of the Church; not the opinions and beliefs which vary from age to age. I mean by Christianity the spirit of Christ, the spirit of loving power, the spirit of heavenly brotherhood, the spirit of childlike trust, which has manifested to us a better world. I do not ask nor care whether this or that saying of Christ has never been said before. It makes little difference, though you may find one of his sayings in the Talmud and another in Confucius. Jesus did not invent truth, but revealed it as it was revealed to him. I do not



care to prove to a doubter whether Jesus worked this or that miracle. I only ask, "Has he not revealed God to man as God has never been revealed by any other? Has he not led us to the Father?" From that obscure village in the mountain region of Galilee there has come a voice which has been listened to with grateful joy in all parts of the earth. Jesus has lifted mankind nearer to heaven. He has brought heaven nearer to earth. If this is not a revelation, where shall we find one? This revelation makes the natural and supernatural one, and shows us

"How to o'errule the hard divorce  
Which parts things natural and divine."

The whole world last week was celebrating the memory of a child born four hundred years ago, in the house of one who worked iron mines at Eisleben. Not only Germans and English, but Americans, Spaniards, and Italians, joined in hymns of praise to God, and said, "Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given." Why was this child's birth commemorated, when we do not thus remember the birthday of Charlemagne and Alfred, Virgil and Dante? Some persons will say because he gave freedom of thought to the world. Bacon, also, gave freedom of thought, and so did Voltaire; but we do not thus remember them. Mankind remembers Luther because he brought us nearer to God, because he made the supernatural world one more natural and reasonable and credible. It was because God, who chooses the foolish things of the world to confound the wise, and the weak things of the world to confound the mighty, chose Luther to be the medium of a new access of heavenly love and light to human hearts. He was selected, as Paul and Augustine, Thomas à Kempis and Fénelon, Channing and Wesley were selected, to fill our common life again with a light from heaven, and to show how true it is that the pure in heart may see God.

When we were told that to-day, at noon, all the clocks and watches are to be put back fifteen minutes, it seemed as if some outrage was to be committed on nature by making time stand still for a quarter of an hour. There would be no progress of time in that interval. Perhaps this led us to ask what the true time really is; and we discovered then, if we did not know it before, that the sun himself does not keep true time, but is always faster or slower than the clock. In order to get true time, we have to fasten our clock to a star, because the star alone is practically at an infinite distance. Thus, even in regulating our daily affairs, we must receive help from the infinite and unchanging. The supernatural world—the world outside of finite, measurable spaces—must come down into the natural, and no earthly watch or clock can go aright until we set it by the infinite distance. If this is true in material things, how much more in spiritual things!





Pamph  
R.Theol  
C

Clarke, James Freeman

Christ and christianity in the light of  
modern thought.

DATE

NAME OF BORROWER

**UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO  
LIBRARY**

---

**DO NOT  
REMOVE  
THE  
CARD  
FROM  
THIS  
POCKET**



Effects on Providence etc

Spaced Providence and the first  
Evangelical History

And Providence has been the great place in Providence  
and the first place in Providence

Providence is the first place in Providence

The century is the decline of Providence in Providence  
I shall see up the decline of Providence in Providence  
and the first place in Providence  
of Providence in Providence